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A WEEK'S WORK IN ENGLISH (7)

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For several years we have had in the Detroit Central High School a course for twelfth-grade students known as English 7. There is no syllabus for this course. It is described by the single phrase, theme writing. The teacher is given the widest latitude in the handling of this work, the only injunction laid upon her being that she shall fit the instruction to the individual needs of the pupils as they come to her. The course has proved decidedly popular and unquestionably useful. For the most part the work has been conducted by the teachers on the theory outlined in Stevenson's *Essay on an Old College Magazine*. It occurs to me that a description of the work done by one of our classes in the course of a week may have some interest.

On Monday, as a model, the teacher dictated to the class Victor Hugo's description of the battlefield of Waterloo as follows:

He who would get a clear idea of the battle of Waterloo has only to lay down upon the ground in his mind a capital A. The left stroke of the A is the road from Nivelles; the right stroke is the road from Genappe; the cross of the A is the sunken road from Ohain to Braine l'Alleud. The top of the A is Mont St. Jean; Wellington is there. The left-hand lower point is Hougomont; Reille is there with Jerome Bonaparte. The right-hand lower point is La Belle Alliance; Napoleon is there. A little below the point where the cross of the A meets and cuts the right stroke is La Haie Sainte. At the middle of this cross is the precise point where the final battle word was spoken. There the lion is placed, the involuntary symbolism of the supreme heroism of the Imperial Guard.

The triangle contained at the top of the A, between the two strokes and the cross, is the plateau of Mont St. Jean. The struggle for this plateau was the whole of the battle.

The wings of the two armies extended to the right and left of the two roads leading from Genappe and from Nivelles, D'Erlon being opposite Picton, Reille opposite Hill. Behind the point of the A, behind the plateau of Mont St. Jean, is the forest of Soignes.

As each sentence was dictated, the teacher requested some member of the class to read it to make sure that it had been correctly understood, and in addition asked that the student tell where marks of punctuation should be placed. In some cases the students were requested to tell whether the sentence was simple, complex, or compound, the idea in this being to show how it should be punctuated and how the author had avoided monotony by means of variety in sentence structure.

The work for Tuesday was definitely assigned by means of the following questions and directions:

1. Who was Wellington?
2. Who was Napoleon?
3. Why did they meet at Waterloo?
4. Where is Waterloo?
5. Explain the principle on which this description has been constructed?
6. Explain the function of each paragraph.
7. Find some other instance in which the principle has been used and bring it to the class.
8. Suggest another subject which can be treated in the same way.
9. Come to the class prepared to present an oral theme on this subject.

The recitation on Tuesday was devoted to the discussion of these questions. Among the subjects presented or suggested were:

The City of Pittsburgh compared to the letter Y.
The State of Michigan compared to a Mitten.
My Uncle's Farm compared to the letter P.
The City of Detroit compared to a Wheel.
A Baseball Field compared to a Diamond.
Italy compared to a Boot.
St. Paul's Cathedral compared to a Cross.
The Battle of Gettysburg compared to Two Fish Hooks.
The Detroit Central High School compared to the letter I.
The State of Louisiana compared to a Chair.
The Siege of Boston compared to the Turkish Crescent.
The City of Chicago compared to the letter Y.

The students were instructed to have these descriptions written out and ready to be handed in on Wednesday.

The recitation on Wednesday was devoted to an oral examination on technical subjects in which some of their previous

compositions had shown a lack of knowledge. The following questions are typical of those discussed:

1. Can you paint a habit?
2. What is the objection to telling an entire story in the tense in which you begin to tell it?
3. Why do city editors insist upon their reporters numbering their pages?
4. What does Chaucer mean when he says:
 There is ne werkeman, whatever he be,
 That can both werken wel and hastile.
5. What figure of speech have we in the phrase: "Make haste slowly."
6. Which uses a larger portion of split infinitives and dangling participles, yourself or Admiral Schley?
7. Under what circumstances is it proper to use a semicolon in a complex sentence?
8. Under what circumstances is it proper to use the word "and" to connect an adverb with a noun?
9. Is any caution required in the use of the word "the"? If so, what?
10. Discuss the difference between the following pairs of words: its and it's; lie and lay; like and as; nor and or; later and latter.
11. Correct the following sentences and tell the reason for each change:
 When still a boy, his parents moved to Kalamazoo.
 Alexander Pope died in 1774.
 A great deal of commerce and importing and exporting is carried on.
 The Scotch inhabit one, the Irish another, the third by the English.
 If anyone thinks this reasonable, let them read the *Merchant of Venice*.
 Dr. Johnson wrote a satire on Juvenal, the life of a savage, and the Pope's *Messiah*.

On Thursday the teacher handed back the compositions which had been presented Wednesday. These had all been proofread. The course is conducted on the theory that every composition must be rewritten until it is good enough to be printed, or, perhaps I should say, correct enough to be printed. Every composition is rewritten unless it is practically correct the first time that it is handed in. It must be understood, however, that mere correctness is not the sole criterion of success. The teachers are constantly on the lookout for something higher and finer. There is a story that Will Levington Comfort, the author of *Routledge Rides Alone*, was once a student in the Detroit Central High School and was plucked in English because he could not or would not live up to the rules of composition laid down by his English teacher. Whether this was a mistake or not I cannot say. Probably he richly

deserved it. At all events the ultimate result has been fairly satisfactory. We entertain the idea that the commonplace student and the genius are neither of them any the worse for being able to spell and punctuate.

Friday is public-speaking day. On that day the compositions that are worth reading are read. Those who have succeeded in writing sufficiently well throughout the week have really no preparation to make for this day. The others are required to hand in their compositions rewritten. Those who have not been able to write anything sufficiently good to be read to the class are also required to speak a piece written by somebody else.

As a slight indication of the quality of work which this system produces, I add two of the compositions written during the week which I have just been describing.

MICHIGAN

He who would get a very clear idea of the lower peninsula of Michigan has only to think of a mitten. The counties between Saginaw Bay and Lake Huron are the thumb. The counties bounded by Lake Michigan, the Straits of Mackinac, and Lake Huron are the tip of the mitten. Detroit, the largest and most important city of Michigan, is situated at the base of the thumb. Saginaw and Bay City, both of which are noted for their great out-put of lumber, are between the thumb and the first finger. Alpena, noted for its large cement factory, is at the end of the first finger. On the end of the second finger is Cheboygan, a great lumber center. Petoskey, a popular summer resort, is on the end of the third finger. Grand Rapids, a great manufacturing center for furniture, is just below the fourth finger. If we could imagine a life line drawn on the mitten, Ann Arbor, in which the University of Michigan is located, would be at the lower end of the life line. The mitten is filled with holes which represent the many small lakes of Michigan.

CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

He who would get a clear idea of the plan of Central High School has only to think of a capital I. The top and bottom strokes, together with the line joining them, are halls. At the right end of the lower hall is the Warren Avenue entrance; at the left end are the Hancock Avenue entrance and the 12-A assembly room, while at the point where the joining line meets the lower stroke is the main entrance on Cass Avenue. At the point of intersection of the top stroke and the joining line of the I is the 11-A assembly room, while on the left and right are the 12-B and 11-B assembly rooms respectively. At the extremities of the upper stroke on the second floor are two large gymnasiums. The 10-A assembly room is at the left end of the lower stroke; and the

10-B assembly room is at the middle of the upper stroke. On the third floor, which consists only of the lower stroke and the joining line of the I, are the 9-B and 9-A assembly rooms, while in the joining line is the large school auditorium. The remainder of the halls, throughout the building, is lined with classrooms.

On the left and right of the joining line, and between the two cross strokes of the I, are courts, with doors leading out on them, where the students are allowed to go during the recreation period.

Among other things that have been used in this course for models this semester are the following:

1. The first and second paragraphs in *Bleak House* for a description of the weather.
2. Eugene Field's room in his Denver newspaper office, as described by Slason Thompson, for describing an animal by means of his den or a man by means of his room.
3. One of Macaulay's letters to his sister Hannah (see Trevelyan's *Life of Macaulay*, year 1843) as a model for a travel letter.
4. Kingsley's *Three Fishers* for a story in three pictures or situations.
5. Charles Lamb's *Autobiography* as a model for a short autobiography or biography.
6. The first paragraph in Caesar's *Commentaries* as a description of some other country; for example, the British Isles, North America, or the United States.
7. Oliver Wendell Holmes's paragraphs on slang in the *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* for an argument against anything objectionable, such as tardiness, whining, the use of the expression "I can't," laziness, etc.
8. Addison's *Essay on Clubs* as a model for an essay on houses, windows, janitors, street cars, churches, uniforms, etc.